

A New Game Plan For Union Organizing (7)

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This is the seventh of eight articles on union organizing.

NEGOTIATING A FIRST CONTRACT

To win a first contract that is satisfactory to the workers is a difficult task that requires careful preparation, psychological insights and good judgment on the part of the union negotiators.

Involving rank-and-file workers in the negotiating process is of utmost importance. They must feel they are properly represented on the negotiating committee, so that it includes women, minorities and workers from key departments.

Every effort should be made to gain the support of those workers who may have voted against the union. The more united the workers are, the better chance of winning a good contract.

Preparing Contract Demands

All employees in the bargaining unit should be given an opportunity to express what they think should be included in the contract. The negotiating committee will sift through the "laundry list" of demands and decide both the priority order of the proposals and what weight to give to each of them at the bargaining table.

Union negotiators will take into account the state of the economy, the wage and benefit standards in the industry, the profitability of the employer and, of course, the issues about which the workers feel most keenly. They will make a distinction between what is desirable but unrealistic and what they believe is attainable.

Contract bargaining is a complicated game of give-and-take, with each side trying to determine what the other side is willing to settle for. Union negotiators must be shrewd players and exercise good judgment at the bargaining table. They must know on what issues they can horse-trade to their advantage and on what issues they will hold firm.

Union negotiators must maintain complete unity at the bargaining

table. If there are disagreements within the committee, a recess should be called and the differences ironed out. Under no circumstances should the employer representatives be allowed to exploit any overt sign of disunity.

Workplace Pressure Helps Union Negotiators

What gives strength to a union negotiating committee is the level of support it gets from the rank-and-file while the talks are going on. The employer's attitude at the bargaining table is affected by what's happening in his workplace.

His supervisors keep him informed about how his workers feel about the negotiations and what they expect to get from a contract. It can make a big difference in the terms of the contract if the workers express strong, visible support for their negotiating committee, rather than appear indifferent and uninvolved.

The big test for the union negotiators comes when they present the tentative contract to the workers in the bargaining unit for ratification. They must prove that the contract is the best that could be achieved without a strike.

If the contract is rejected, there are three options: (1) instruct the negotiating committee to go back to the bargaining table and try to improve the contract; (2) elect a new negotiating committee with instructions to improve the contract in certain particulars, and (3) go out on strike. In the end, most tentative contracts are ratified, some with minor, face-saving changes.

Winning a first contract is a major achievement for workers in any company or institution. The new agreement may leave some workers disappointed because they expected more, but it is an important foundation on which to build for the future.

Maintaining a Strong Union

Now that they are full-fledged union members working under a negotiated contract, the workers will still have a great deal to do to protect what they've won. They should be on guard against attempts by the employer and his supervisors to undermine important provisions of the contract and bad-mouth the union and its officers.

The union has to prove not only that it can win a decent contract, but that it can enforce it. Shop stewards must be chosen who are well-informed, articulate and won't be intimidated by

management. Grievances must not be allowed to pile up and fester. Workers must feel confident that their stewards are handling their complaints in a satisfactory manner.

Newly-elected officers must ensure that management respects the authority of the union and treats them with respect. They must strengthen the bonds of solidarity among their members by treating them equally and fairly, including those who originally had opposed the union. When workers speak with one voice on issues that matter, management will have to listen.

Through their long, continuing struggle, workers should come to realize that in their workplace, *they are the union*.

Article 8, which ends this series, will be posted on Monday, December 29.